



## “A Whole ‘Nother Smoke” or a Cigarette in Disguise: How RJ Reynolds Reframed the Image of Little Cigars

Cristine D. Delnevo, PhD, MPH, and Mary Hrywna, MPH

Present-day consumption of little cigars rivals that of the early 1970s when sales of little cigars boomed. This boom was largely attributed to RJ Reynolds, and documents reveal how and why they became a powerful force in little cigar sales. RJ Reynolds designed a little cigar, *Winchesters*, for cigarette smokers and produced one as close to a cigarette as legally possible.

Initially, RJ Reynolds intended to capitalize on the cigarette advertising broadcast ban, but the price and tax structure was more critical to *Winchester's* success. Today, the tobacco industry is fighting again to sustain its unique application of federal definitions for little cigars. Regulatory efforts are needed to close taxation loopholes for the little cigar. (*Am J Public Health*. 2007;97:1368–1375. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2006.101063)

### CIGAR SMOKING ROSE

dramatically during the 1990s after decades of declining consumption. Higher levels of cigar use coincided with increased and innovative cigar marketing by the tobacco industry, the high visibility offered by many celebrities quoted and photographed with cigars, and the success of *Cigar Aficionado* and *Smoke* magazines.<sup>1–3</sup> Cigar use is often rejected by the public as a serious health risk but even

moderate cigar use poses significant dangers to health.<sup>4</sup> The rapid rise in cigar use during the mid-1990s garnered much attention from the public health and lay community. However, some surveys suggest that the cigar boom may be over<sup>5,6</sup> and interest in cigar use as a public health problem has waned.<sup>7</sup> However, it would be premature to conclude that the popularity of cigars has subsided. Data from the US Department of Agriculture clearly indicate that cigar consumption continues to increase each year.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to previous trends during the “boom,” the largest growth since 1998 was not among large cigars<sup>1</sup> but among “little cigars,” which increased 170% between 1998 and 2006.<sup>8</sup> Although little cigars

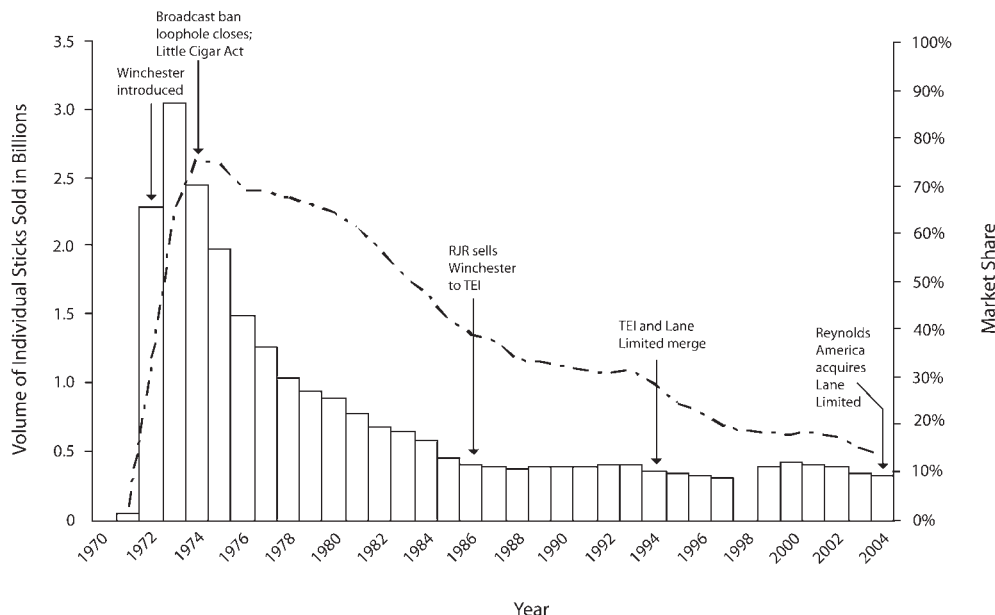
differ from large ones with respect to weight, this is not the only nor, arguably, the most important distinction between them. Other characteristics of little cigars that set them apart from large ones are features common to cigarettes, such as shape, size, filters, and packaging (i.e., 20 sticks to a pack; Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Present-day consumption of little cigars (more than 4 billion sticks in 2006) rivals that of the early 1970s when a loophole in the federal law (i.e., Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act) banned cigarette ads on television but allowed on-air marketing of little cigars. Sales of little cigars quadrupled between 1971 and 1973. In addition to banning cigarette advertising on television and radio, the Public

Health Cigarette Smoking Act also required that cigarette packs display stronger health warnings. At the time, cigars did not require warning labels. The success of the little cigar in the early 1970s was overwhelmingly attributed to RJ Reynolds's (RJR's) little cigar “*Winchester*” (Figure 2), which was extensively criticized for its cigarette-like marketing.

Policymakers and public health advocates criticized RJR's *Winchester* little cigars, calling them “cigarettes in disguise,” and initiated unsuccessful regulatory efforts in the early 1970s to reclassify little cigars as cigarettes. Renewed efforts are under way to address the proliferation of the cigarette-like little cigar. The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), as a result of numerous inquiries for clarification on the regulations that pertain to these products, drafted proposed changes to the regulations to better differentiate little cigars and cigarettes.<sup>9</sup> As such, we feel it important to revisit the past and consider in particular how and why a cigarette company emerged as a powerful force in the sales of little cigars. We analyzed internal tobacco industry documents from the early 1970s and focused on RJR's development and marketing of the *Winchester* little cigar.



**FIGURE 1—Doral cigarettes, Winchester little cigars, and Dutch Masters (large) cigars.**



Notes. Data for this figure were compiled from numerous Maxwell Reports (statistical surveys of the cigarette industry); data for 1998 could not be obtained. RJR = RJ Reynolds; TEI = Tobacco Exporter International.

**FIGURE 2—Winchester little cigars volume and market share, by year: 1970–2004.**

## TOBACCO INDUSTRY DOCUMENT REVIEW

We performed searches of the tobacco industry document archives from the University of California, San Francisco, Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (<http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu>) between January and June 2006. The initial search, which yielded almost 4000 documents, focused on the product (i.e., little or small cigar) and brand name (Winchester) and was restricted to a 10-year span (1965 to 1975). Searches were repeated and focused with standard techniques.<sup>10</sup> We used snowball sampling techniques to search for contextual information on relevant documents with names, project titles (e.g., project CC became Winchester), dates, and adjacent Bates

numbers. Our analysis is based on a final collection of approximately 262 research reports, presentations, memorandums, and newspaper articles. To place the documents into their historical and situational context,<sup>11</sup> we analyzed themes chronologically and developed a timeline of events (see the box on the next page).

## FINDINGS

### Background

In the late 1960s, after decades of considerable growth, the cigarette industry was confronted with weak sales<sup>12</sup> and identified 3 threats: the health consequences of cigarette smoking highlighted in the 1964 Surgeon General's Report, a potential broadcast advertising ban, and higher prices.<sup>13–15</sup> Cigarette companies considered

strategies to combat these threats, and little cigars were uniquely suited to do that for several reasons. Little cigar sales soared after the 1964 Surgeon General's Report.<sup>16–18</sup> Considered “a closer cigarette substitute,”<sup>19</sup> they were perceived as safer than cigarettes because cigars were typically not inhaled.<sup>17,20</sup> Fearing a cigarette broadcast advertising ban, the industry looked to the United Kingdom, where the 1965 cigarette advertising broadcast ban prompted a drop in cigarette consumption and a rise in cigar consumption.<sup>12,13</sup> This was attributed to the “little” cigar or “cigarette-sized” cigar, which was still advertised on television.<sup>12,13</sup> Finally, cigarette excise taxes were increasing in the United States. Between 1960 and 1970, state revenue from cigarette taxes increased

more than 150% while sales grew by only 10%.<sup>21</sup> The little cigar, with its low excise tax, was considerably less expensive than cigarettes.<sup>22–24</sup> Thus, the growing interest in little cigars was fueled by low price, implicit health perceptions, and the unlimited use of mass media. RJR, in particular, was determined to exploit these advantages. In October 1968, RJR initiated the development of Winchester, a “cigarettelike cigar” with cigarette taste and mildness (Figure 3).<sup>14</sup>

## Product Development

From the beginning, the Winchester little cigar walked a fine line between cigar and cigarette. The project name itself, “project CC,” short for cigar/cigarettes, reflected ambiguity.<sup>25</sup> Confusion over the product's identity was found in numerous documents where RJR's own employees repeatedly referred to project CC as a cigarette.<sup>25–29</sup> RJR believed that although the little cigar market was competitive, it remained small because most little cigars were “too strong to allow easy transition for cigarette smokers.”<sup>12</sup> Early CC blends, which contained cigar tobacco and tobacco commonly found in cigarettes (i.e., flue-cured, burley, and Turkish tobacco), had a mild taste, but RJR desired a still-milder taste with less cigar aroma.<sup>29</sup>

In September 1970, RJR submitted project CC to the Internal Revenue Service for a ruling on whether CC could be taxed, and subsequently sold, as a little cigar. The blend of this first submission contained 67% cigar tobacco, 20% to 25% flue-cured tobacco, and 5% to 10% Turkish



### Timeline for RJ Reynolds's (RJR's) Winchester Little Cigar

Date	Event
January 1968	The Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act, passed in 1965, which requires health warnings on cigarette packages only, goes into effect
October 1968	RJR files an "Opportunity Planning Proposal" for project CC (i.e., Winchester)
September 1970	RJR submits project CC to IRS for a "little cigar" ruling
October 1970	IRS rejects project CC as a "little cigar"
December 1970	RJR submits project CC to the IRS a second time
January 1971	The Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act of 1969, passed in 1970, which bans cigarette advertising on television and radio and requires a stronger health warning on cigarette packages, goes into effect
January 1971	IRS approves project CC as a "little cigar"
August 1971	RJR test markets Winchester little cigars in Boston, Mass, and Dayton, Ohio
October 1971	Action on Smoking and Health files complaint with US Department of Justice regarding Winchester's marketing and advertising
January 1972	US Department of Justice reaches agreement with RJR regarding Winchester's marketing
February 1972	US Sen Frank Moss (D, Utah) holds subcommittee hearing on Winchester
September 1972	Winchester filtered little cigar is launched nationally
January 1973	RJR joins the Little Cigar Council Board of Directors
January 1973	Senator Moss announces his intention to introduce legislation to redefine little cigars as cigarettes
February 1973	RJR voluntarily agrees to terminate all broadcast advertising for Winchester
September 1973	The Little Cigar Act of 1973 extends the cigarette broadcast ban to include little cigars and prohibits their marketing within the electronic media

Notes. CC=cigar/cigarettes; IRS=Internal Revenue Service.

tobacco,<sup>30</sup> and the reconstituted tobacco wrapper likely contained primarily cigarette tobacco.<sup>30-32</sup> The Internal Revenue Service found the wrapper and filler problematic,<sup>33</sup> and the product was reformulated with an all-cigar-tobacco wrapper, removal of flue-cured tobacco from the filler, and an increase of cigar tobacco in the filler (from 67% to 75%).<sup>34</sup> The modified product was resubmitted to the Internal Revenue Service and approved on January 15, 1971.<sup>35</sup>

### Marketing

RJR gave careful consideration toward positioning this product in the market—"Is it a cigar, a cigarette, or somewhere in

between?"<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, project CC was marketed to cigarette smokers as a cigarette substitute.<sup>12,36,37</sup> The initial marketing concept was to position project CC as "the little cigar designed for the cigarette smoker" with an "explicit health claim—satisfaction without inhaling."<sup>37</sup> However, this concept was more challenging than anticipated. Focus groups with smokers revealed that the product would probably be inhaled, regardless of promotional messages to the contrary.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, initial product testing validated this:

Most men (and women) inhaled their first puffs of this new product. When asked why, they said it was because the product

seemed like a cigarette in terms of size and shape and because the filter suggested that it could be smoked just like a cigarette . . . many said they could not imagine giving up inhaling under any circumstances.<sup>38</sup>

Consumer testing found the product to be "surprisingly mild" and "closer to a cigarette taste," especially when compared with other little cigars on the market.<sup>36,38</sup> RJR's market research showed that the percentage of smokers who identified project CC as a little cigar was "surprisingly low,"<sup>39</sup> and many cigarette smokers assumed that the little cigar product, described as "a new kind of smoke" was "another cigarette brand."<sup>40</sup>

RJR's key marketing objective was to communicate that although Winchester was not a cigarette, it was similar to cigarettes in many ways.<sup>41</sup> Advertising research on the Winchester "Beach" commercial found that the ad successfully utilized several elements to evoke cigarette associations. In addition to the product's visual similarity to cigarettes, focus group participants for the commercial recalled voiceovers saying, "It's not a cigar," a woman inhaling the product, and a man reminiscent of the Marlboro cowboy.<sup>42</sup> Although RJR executives found the results of the "Beach" focus group encouraging, they wanted more:

The "20 Little Cigars" super at the end of the commercial was in relatively large type and contributed to the recognition that Winchester is a Little Cigar. This type size will be reduced. The fact that the older, sloppy man was smoking a big cigar resulted in some smokers thinking that Winchester is for cigar, not cigarette smokers. For this reason other commercials in the pool will probably not show cigars being smoked. In our analysis we will look for additional clues as to how to position Winchester closer to cigarettes.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to presenting mixed messages about the product, advertising for Winchester intended to "take maximum advantage of access to broadcast media"<sup>44</sup> and use price disparity as a promotional tactic targeted to regions where little cigars had a significant price advantage over cigarettes.<sup>44,45</sup>





PLANNING FORM NO. 2

*Food Definition*

**PROVISIONAL PLANNING PROPOSAL**  
(USE A SEPARATE SHEET FOR EACH PROPOSAL)

☒ Opportunity New Cigar Product ☐ Problem   
(Small Cigar)

Short Title CC

Department Marketing Unit

**Description of Opportunity or Problem**

- 1- Small cigar business is growing.
- 2- Anti-cigarette publicity continues unabated.
- 3- Cigarette advertising may be severely restricted.

**Background (Substantiating References and Facts)**  
CC would be positioned as a:

- 1- Cigar with cigarette taste.
- 2- Cigar with cigarette mildness.
- 3- Light golden tan wrapper.
- 4- 100mm length and 24.8mm circumference.
- 5- 20mm estron filter.

Basic copy claims would be directed toward "A mild, slightly aromatic smoke - you don't have to inhale to enjoy". Copy execution would be contemporary aimed at the young (25-35 year old smoker).

**Proposed Action and Alternatives (If program currently in process, also indicate status and actions yet to be taken.)**

- 1- Develop complete marketing proposal to develop and test a super king size cigarette-like cigar directed to young male smokers.
- 2- Assuming approval by top management, proceed with all basic steps to prepare this project for test marketing.

*Winston Churchill*  
*Winston Churchill*  
*Winston Churchill*  
*Winston Churchill*

FIGURE 3—RJ Reynolds's 1968 planning proposal for project CC (Winchester little cigar).

### "Winchester Is Here"

In August 1971, RJR test marketed Winchester in Boston, Mass, and Dayton, Ohio, which attracted the attention of its competitors, including Brown and Williamson, American Tobacco, and Philip Morris, who quickly initiated product tests.<sup>46-48</sup> Analysis by these companies suggested that the Winchester filler contained flue-cured, burley, Turkish, and reconstituted tobacco<sup>46-48</sup>; the product was less alkaline (i.e., had greater inhalability) than other little cigars<sup>46,47</sup>; and the wrapper "seems to be

more like paper."<sup>49</sup> and contained little tobacco,<sup>47,48</sup> "at most a few random tobacco fibers."<sup>46</sup> Competitors also recognized Winchester's marketing campaign for what it was: "an all-out effort similar to the way in which cigarette brands—not little cigar brands—have been previously introduced."<sup>50</sup> Philip Morris categorized Winchester as a "cheap cigarette" designed to evade cigarette taxes.<sup>51</sup>

Winchester also garnered considerable attention from journalists, law makers,<sup>51,52</sup> and advocates,<sup>53,54</sup> who posited that

Winchester was developed to circumvent the ban on cigarette advertising on television. RJ Reynolds publicly denied this on numerous occasions: "Obviously, we could not have diabolically designed the product to take advantage of what you term 'a legalistic loophole,' which did not then exist and which in our opinion does not now exist."<sup>55</sup> However, a 1968 company document clearly identified cigarette advertising restrictions as 1 rationale for this product's development (Figure 3).<sup>14</sup> The antismoking group Action on Smoking and

Health and other advocacy groups were particularly critical of RJR's tactics to confuse the consumer.<sup>53,54</sup> Prompted by a complaint filed by Action on Smoking and Health, the US Department of Justice reached an accord with RJR who agreed to change Winchester packaging (i.e., clear labeling as a little cigar) and point-of-sale marketing (i.e., prevent mixing with cigarettes on counters and in vending machines).<sup>56</sup> Although the Department of Justice agreement did not address or restrict RJR's television advertising of Winchester, Sen Frank Moss (D, Utah) pushed the agenda forward and held hearings that challenged RJR's right to advertise Winchester on television.<sup>57</sup>

### Little Cigar Council

In response to the Moss hearings, Charles Mouhtouris, a 30-year veteran of the Internal Revenue Service and former Chief of the Tobacco Tax Branch, formed the Little Cigar Council (LCC), a lobbying group that represented several tobacco manufacturers who sold little cigars, in 1972.<sup>58</sup> Mouhtouris stated unequivocally during the Moss hearings that "none of our little cigar customers have confused our products with cigarettes, and we have never attempted to cause any such confusion."<sup>58</sup> After the Moss hearings, the LCC approached major cigarette manufacturers who also produced little cigars, and RJR joined the LCC board of directors.<sup>59</sup> However, American Tobacco was critical of the LCC for ignoring the problems



associated with “Reynolds’ cigarette-type advertising of Winchester” and claimed the LCC was nothing more than a “front for RJ Reynolds.”<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, LCC “dues” were based on market share,<sup>61</sup> and so RJR had considerable financial influence with the Council.

### Winchester Launches Nationally

Winchester launched nationally in September 1972 and dominated the market (Figure 2). RJ Reynolds was particularly successful in states where the cigarette tax was high and the low price, relative to cigarettes, was exploited at point-of-sale.<sup>62,63</sup> However, RJR’s success did not free them from worries; there was considerable concern that existing market advantages (i.e., broadcast advertising and price) were in jeopardy.<sup>64</sup>

In January 1973, Senator Moss announced intentions to legislatively redefine cigarettes to include little cigars.<sup>65</sup> RJ Reynolds management was very concerned: “[I]f we lose the battle with Moss, we will then lose our battles with the states to maintain our tax advantage.”<sup>66</sup> A month later, under pressure from Senators Magnuson (D, Wash) and Cook (R, Ky), Lorillard and RJR voluntarily withdrew their ads from television.<sup>67</sup> Congress later closed the “loophole” by extending the broadcast ban to include little cigars, with the Little Cigar Act of 1973, but did not redefine little cigars as cigarettes.

Did RJR truly lose the broadcast ban battle or was its voluntary withdrawal an offensive

maneuver to protect the tax status of its little cigar? Although industry documents are not definitive, certain facts suggest that RJR’s withdrawal was a strategic move to divert attention from the redefinition of little cigars as cigarettes. By 1972, RJR found that, contrary to its fears, the ban on broadcasting tobacco advertisements did not weaken but rather increased cigarette consumption<sup>68,69</sup> and, furthermore, weak cigarette sales in the late 1960s “resulted from state taxes rather than the health controversy and the anti-cigarette commercial.”<sup>70</sup> And so, with respect to its little cigar, RJR notes that the “real cornerstone of this proposition, the one that has really made the brand a success, is Winchester’s ability to beat the high cost of cigarettes.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, by 1973, RJR was likely much more fearful of higher taxes than of television advertising restrictions for Winchester.

RJ Reynolds’s marketing strategy shifted after the 1973 broadcast ban toward extensive print media targeted to areas with high cigarette taxes.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, numerous states introduced legislation that would diminish Winchester’s tax advantage (i.e., taxing or defining little cigars as cigarettes).<sup>73</sup> RJ Reynolds actively fought such legislation and was “extremely successful in defeating little cigar taxation which would severely damage Winchester’s business.”<sup>74</sup> In addition, the LCC actively worked to protect the little cigar’s tax status and retained lobbyists in numerous states to do so.<sup>61</sup>

### Winchester’s Later Years

With the loss of broadcast media for Winchester, RJR executives tried to capitalize on Winchester’s success and strong brand awareness by developing a cigarette spinoff.<sup>75</sup> The Winchester cigarette launched in 1974, but without a price advantage, the cigarette did poorly<sup>76</sup> and was quickly discontinued. In the late 1970s, little cigar volume declined considerably, and although RJR continued to dominate the market, Winchester’s volume declined faster than the rest of the market.<sup>77</sup> The early 1980s were characterized by a boom in the generic and discount cigarette market,<sup>78</sup> which likely eroded Winchester’s volume further, and in 1987, RJR sold the Winchester brand to Tobacco Exporter International.

### RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY TOBACCO CONTROL

Almost 40 years ago, RJR engaged in a calculated effort to blur the line between cigarettes and little cigars with Winchester, a little cigar designed for cigarette smokers that was as close to cigarettes as legally possible. Although RJR was chiefly motivated by the television broadcast ban during Winchester’s early development, it was the company’s careful consideration of price and tax structure that was the dominant factor in its success. The little cigar boom of the early 1970s was largely attributed to the loophole in the broadcast ban,<sup>1</sup> but tax disparities and price played an equal, if not greater, role.

Today there is an overwhelming sense of déjà vu—little cigar sales reached an all-time high in 2006.<sup>79</sup> As was the case 40 years ago, there is a marked disparity between cigarette and little cigar excise taxes. Cigarette excise tax increases in numerous states resulted in a doubling of the average tax (includes state and federal) levied on a pack of cigarettes in the United States between fiscal years 2000 and 2006, from \$0.65 to \$1.31.<sup>21</sup> In states with high cigarette excise taxes, a pack of little cigars costs less than half as much as a pack of cigarettes.<sup>7</sup> Lower cigar prices are associated with higher rates of cigar use,<sup>80</sup> and price disparities may also encourage product switching.<sup>81–83</sup> Not surprisingly, little cigar marketing continues to capitalize on tax disparities and cigarette-like characteristics.<sup>7</sup> For example, PrimeTime Cigars’s Web site once advertised “so much like cigarettes, it’s hard to believe they are cigars!”<sup>84</sup>

In addition to having a lower tax rate, little cigars are free from the costs and restrictions imposed on cigarettes by the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) and related legislation (e.g., the Comprehensive Smoking Education Act), not the least of which is that little cigar manufacturers are not required to make MSA or escrow payments to states (estimated at \$4.30/carton) as cigarette manufacturers must. Anecdotally, it has been noted by some states that several cigarette manufacturers who failed to make escrow deposits and were subsequently banned from selling cigarettes repackaged their cigarettes as



little cigars, circumventing the es-crow payment.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the Comprehensive Smoking Education Act requires cigarette, but not cigar, manufacturers to disclose ingredients to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Since Winchester broke open the little cigar market some 40 years ago, many little cigar products have been offered to, purchased, and smoked by consumers as a cigarette. Yet, Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Ruling 73-22, which defines tobacco products for taxation, states that an important factor in the determination of the tax status of a product is “whether the product is likely to be offered to, or purchased by, consumers as a cigarette.”<sup>86</sup> Although Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Ruling 73-22 has existed for many years, the rapid increase in little cigar consumption and confusion over product classification prompted the TTB to draft a proposed ruling that clarifies statutory definitions for little cigars in early 2006. Subsequently, 40 state attorneys general petitioned the TTB to ensure that the new regulations classify cigarette-like little cigars as cigarettes.<sup>85</sup>

On October 25, 2006, the TTB released its proposed ruling for public comment. Under the proposed regulations, Winchester and every other “cigarettelike” little cigar would be legally defined as a cigarette.<sup>9</sup> The proposed ruling eliminates many of the tax and regulatory conditions that inappropriately benefit manufacturers that sell cigarette-sized little cigars. The public comment period closed on March 26, 2007, and

28 entities, including tobacco manufacturers, tobacco lobbying associations (e.g., Cigar Association of America), and other stakeholders (e.g., distributors, wholesalers), filed official comments on the TTB proposed rule.<sup>9</sup> A major theme in many of the comments that oppose the proposed rule was the thesis that the little cigar must be a distinct product simply because the product has existed for more than 40 years. To help validate this viewpoint, the comment filed with the TTB on behalf of Reynolds American Inc cites the history of Winchester, which provides a historical account of selective events that lead up to the Little Cigar Act of 1973 and implies that Congress had earlier “rejected” reclassification of little cigars as cigarettes. However, the previously secret tobacco industry documents reviewed herein provide much more insight and suggest that RJR was highly motivated to avoid such a reclassification and likely maneuvered to protect the little cigar’s crucial tax status by its voluntary withdrawal from television.

In the late 1970s, Winchester little cigars came under fire from politicians, advocates, and regulatory agencies for its cigarette-like design and marketing. Yet the current situation is unchanged from nearly 4 decades ago. The tobacco industry is fighting again to sustain its unique application of federal definitions for certain tobacco products.<sup>9</sup> Cigar manufacturers contend that their only aim is to satisfy cigar smokers. However, little cigars have quietly grown in popularity, in no small part

because the tobacco industry then and now has knowingly and deliberately marketed the little cigar as a suitable, and more favorably priced, choice for cigarette smokers. Policy approaches, such as the TTB proposed rule,<sup>9</sup> are needed to close taxation loopholes<sup>87</sup> for the cigarette-like “little cigar.” ■

### About the Authors

Cristine D. Delnevo and Mary Hrywna are with the Department of Health Education/Behavioral Science, School of Public Health, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Piscataway.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Cristine D. Delnevo, UMDNJ-School of Public Health, 317 George St, Suite 209, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 (e-mail: delnevo@umdnj.edu).

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### Contributions

C.D. Delnevo and M. Hrywna contributed to the essay’s conceptualization, writing, and editing and to the interpretation of tobacco industry documents. C.D. Delnevo searched the tobacco industry document archive and found most of the documents discussed in this essay.

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